

WRITER SCHOOL?

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Here's something from my mailbag. "Dear Michael, do you need to do good in school if you want to be a writer? I stink at school and all my friends laugh at me when I tell them I want to write, but I'm serious." Followed by a sentence or two of "I need your words to encourage me" or some such nonsense.

Fortunately, a writing sample is rarely attached. If it is, either it's excellent or it stinks like rancid yak butter. There's a lot of middle ground in the writing world, of course, but for some reason it never seems to accompany these emails.

The message is usually (but not always) so filled with errors that I'm not gonna reprint them here or correct them when I reply lest I destroy some sensitive soul like a jackhammer to an eggshell. It's ridiculous that I should even have such power, being a stranger and all. Let's move on to the relevant part, the question, which actually contains several. This writer gets bonus points for brevity.

Do you have to be good in school? Given what's passing for English in some places, I'd certainly like to see more effort given to school.

If you aspire to be an author and you did poorly in school, or if you're just plain uneducated, don't let it stop you. What we do as authors isn't taught in school. They teach grammar, and bless them. I can't teach that subject. If you're very fortunate, as I was, you'll stumble across some teachers who also encourage you to think. But thinking is the beginning of writing, not the end, and grammar can be fixed later if you find some long-suffering editor (like me) willing to do it.

In other words, school can help you with the first step or two of your journey to be an author. Considering how many steps come after those, don't be discouraged by test results and report cards.

To distill what you think, feel and believe from all the trash floating around in your head, and then to actually put that on paper the way you mean to put it, is a skill that only comes from years of practice. I struggled at this for 20 years or so after I graduated from college. I didn't learn to write in a classroom.

In my travels through the Intergoogle, I've met blind authors, deaf authors, dyslexic authors, authors writing in a second or third language, authors suffering partial paralysis, authors with various psychoses, authors who deal with more than one of these obstacles. What they

overcome makes my complaint, that I'm too left-brained to be in this business, seem absolutely pathetic. And yours, about doing poorly in school.

I could cite you a VERY long list of authors who did poorly in school. If I did my job as an editor, you'll never know who they are unless I call them out by name. And I won't. Probably because I can't remember them all.

(I'm joking. Editor/author confidentiality protects them, even if it exists only in my imagination.)

Our emailer then mentions that her friends laugh at her when she tells them she intends to write. Why does she care? I've lost count of how many projects I've undertaken despite criticism. Not just writing, either. Life. But let me narrow my focus just so I can end this rant.

You have a reason for writing. You know what it is, even if you can't put it into words. I can't put it into words. ("It" can mean your reason *or* mine in that sentence.) But it's there. Why do you give a rat's backside how many people tell you not to even try? People who I doubt have even read your writing, I might add. Your classmates won't understand why you write. Nor your friends. Nor your family. You're lucky if you find ten non-writers in your lifetime who have a clue. And you don't care. You just write.

If you're ever lucky enough to "arrive," then all the doubters will claim to understand why you write. And they'll all be wrong.

Also, by the time someone out there is embracing your work, you'll already be three books beyond it and sick of hearing about your old trash. No, it won't be trash, but you'll think of it that way. There's a big time lapse between creation and that Oprah interview.

What I never write to those emailers is this. I shouldn't have to tell you why you write. You don't need my vindication or anyone else's. If those who haven't even read your work can discourage you, maybe you should give up. Or do an Emily Dickinson and leave it all for people to find after you die.

But I can tell you this. If you'll let something as silly as your grades in school stop you from even beginning to write in the first place, nothing you have to write is worth finding after you die. And if you're angry at me for saying it, good. Prove me wrong. Write a book.